A Childhood on Disc

Doctor Who and the Lost Audios

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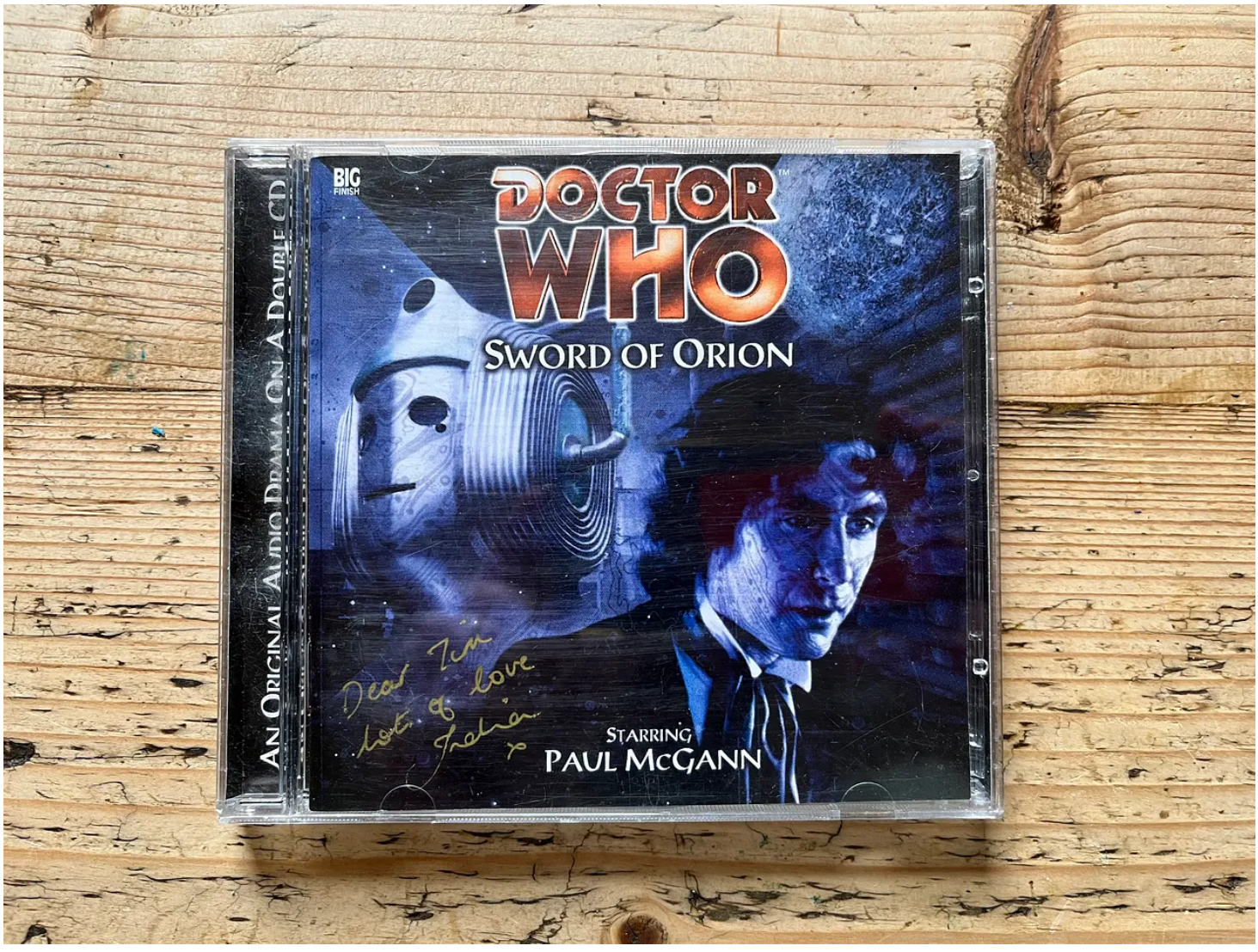
There once was a box in a barn in Northern Ireland. And it sat there for over fifteen years. This box had been overlooked, abandoned, written off by those who vaguely recalled it. But one day, a distant relative came across it. It then went into a variety of car boots, crossed the Irish Sea in a ferry, loitered in a garage or two... before making its way to me last week.

Inside the box, dear reader, was my old Big Finish collection.



I've written of my love of the early DOCTOR WHO audios before, but I'd long since accepted the fact that I was no longer able to listen to these stories in their original format. My prized assortment of CDs had disappeared during a house move. I was devastated of course, but I got over it. I repurchased some as downloads, listened to some as freebies on Spotify. Look, the discs were no longer available, but I didn't neeeeed physical copies. Who even owns CDs anyway? I pictured Nicholas Parsons in a pulpit, softly reassuring me to put away childish things.

And as soon as I opened the box, I became a child once more.

THE PAST (Big Finished)

The first Big Finish story I ever listened to was WINTER FOR THE ADEPT. The CD was lent to me by my English teacher, Mr Brown. I didn't really know what to expect - what was this, a music album? A narrated story? - but it had the DOCTOR WHO logo on the front cover… as well as that nice Doctor and Nyssa I had recently met in SNAKEDANCE… so that night I curled up with my CD Walkman and pressed Play.

The theme tune, that marvelous theme tune. The haunting piano music. The sounds of a blizzard. Footsteps in the snow. Hang on, is that Nyssa?! There are other voices too - the American detective, the posh school girls, the fanatical Scottish teacher… Episode One barely has the Doctor in it at all, but I'm hooked. In fact, I'm more than hooked, I'm completely reeled into this landscape. I'm there in the Swiss Alps, I'm actually cold just listening. I replay the story quite a few times before I reluctantly hand it back.

Bless the Mr Browns of this world, because he doesn't stop there. The next story he lends me is THE SWORD OF ORION. And this one… this one is Something Else. I'm not even sure I'd seen the TV MOVIE by this point (I'd been warned by some magazine article that there was something truly dreadful in the story: kissing). Yet I loved this Doctor. I loved his plucky companion. I loved this soundscape too, it was epic and echoey and metallic, and this ancient ship was full of secrets and Cybermen(!!!). I listened to this particularly story so many times that I tried to make my own copy onto a cassette. Sadly the discs were too long to fit. Here beginnith and here endeth my sole foray into piracy.

I would've borrowed every story that Mr Brown possessed (and I know he would've been only too happy to oblige, he was ace like that) but I found out something

revelatory soon after the loss of the Telosian star destroyer. My uncle, the man who'd got me into DOCTOR WHO in the first place… *was collecting the Big Finish CDs himself*. And once he had listened to them… he said he was more than happy to pass them on.

efniawrfnajlngkjafngljafngjklndfg!!!!! ← that's the exact sound I made at the time.

Once a month or so, I would receive, as the spines excitedly exclaimed, a *BRAND NEW FULL-CAST AUDIO CD*. And the thing that made me really giddy was the fact that this was all uncharted territory. By this age - 11ish, surely the ultimate age of childhood - I'd watched a fair bit of DOCTOR WHO on video, but I was very very aware that there were only eight Doctors and there were only twenty-six seasons. No more. And yet… these audio stories were not in my episode lists or reference books. That *BRAND NEW* on the spine wasn't lying. These were tales that had never happened, like the Fifth Doctor meeting the Ice Warriors or the Sixth Doctor meeting the Brigadier or the Seventh Doctor meeting my favourite ever King Dalek from PLANET OF THE DALEKS. And they were the *actual* Fifth/Sixth/Seventh Doctors, these weren't drawings of them, or words describing them. These were the genuine article, speaking to me through my headphones.

I listened to these stories over and over and over. The arrival of a new one meant I had to reassure the others I wouldn't forgot about them and the relistens would begin again. (At some point the Doctor Who Missing Episode CDs get introduced into my audio menagerie, but I have to save up and buy those myself from W.H.Smiths so they arrive less frequently.) There are whole sections of dialogue I start to accidentally memorise. I buy the script books to see how they're written.

And there comes a night when I unknowingly listen to a story for the last time. I put it in a box, along with its other compatriots. Don't worry, I'll see them all in a couple of weeks I'm sure.

Years and years go by.

THE PRESENT (Big Finish)

Now yes, a nostalgic treasure trove like this is wildly thrilling. But it has, lest we forget, been hiding in a barn for over a decade and a half. And I don't know how many of you are familiar with Northern Ireland's climate but… it is not ideal for storing things in the semi-outside.

So, after I finish *ooh*ing and *ahh*ing at the contents, I properly rifle through the box to assess the damage. And there are a number of issues.

Those of a nervous disposition, please look away now.

1. **Not all the stories are here.** Oh dear. A few of my favourites are missing. I have vague recollections of taking THE MARIAN CONSPIRACY on a bus trip. THE WORMERY, wherefore art thou. PRIMEVAL, come back to me my beloved.
2. **Not all the discs are here.** Ironically, as soon as the spines start decrying the new text of *AN ORIGINAL AUDIO DRAMA ON DOUBLE CD*, my CDs start divorcing. Some are hidden in other cases - I discovered the second disc of SPARE PARTS hiding out with a Sarah Jane Smith, for example, phew - but some are clearly gone for good. I will never remember how DAVROS ends. (I bloody well will, what a story.)

3. **Not all the discs are in good condition.** BLOODTIDE, what did I ever do to you? Listen to you too many times, that's what. ("And that's something else I've tortoise!") Honestly, the CDs look like they've been chewed by a Myrka.
4. **Daaaaaamp**. As expected… some of the booklets and back covers are a lil bit wrinkly. And a few of the discs… yeah, those are speckles of mold. This calls for general flattening and gentle wipeage.

If this all sounds depressing… it actually isn't, not really. You have to remember that I'd written these off for good. To see any glimpse of them again is pretty wonderful, no matter how dishevelled or damaged. And the act of slowly cleaning these discs and rehousing them in plastic wallets (most of the hard plastic cases are crushed and cracked)… well, I find it a wholesome, meditative process.

I see that some of them are signed. You can spy my SWORD at the top of the article (oh I say), but I also got India to sign THE CHIMES OF MIDNIGHT, because of course I did. Paul McGann has signed THE LAST, a story I recall very little of, except the fact I was very shaken and thought he was marvellous in it. There are several others signatories too. And signed items don't exist in a vacuum, do they - they remind me of when I first met these actors, memories I thought I'd boxed away as well. I met so many of the Big Finish cast and crew at "Dimensions", an event that used to be hosted in my hometown of Stockton-on-Tees. It's still the only time I've been to a convention (someone invite me to Big Finish Day please).

ONCE UPON A TIME…
The fairy appeared in a lamplight moonbeam. The crocodile sna
pirates shivered their timbers, and the Captain waved his hook. Th
children gasped, and goggled, and gasped, and goggled; cheere
hissed the baddies. And clapped their hands, because they all
All too soon, the adventure was over. The boy who could f
called Miss Forbes-Robertson, who stepped forward, polite
The curtain seemed to sigh as it fell.
Outside the Palladium, the evening air was filled wit
burning chestnuts. Somewhere down the way, a newsy
shouted out about a man who'd died, a man called
small for her age, tugged at her Nanny's sleeve an
sky.
'Is that it, there?' she asked. 'Is that the star
'You can't tell your right from your left, yo
'Now come along.'
'I'm sure that's the one,' insisted the g
went by.'
Nanny paid her no attention, and f
screwed up her eyes, tight, and made
'I never, ever, want to grow up,
When she opened her eyes, th
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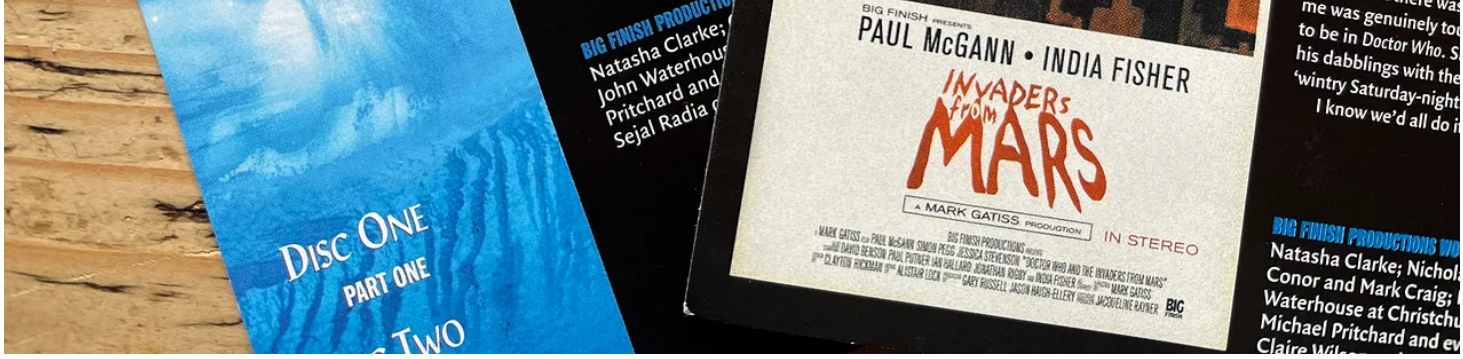

But even if the CDs haven't been notarised by my heroes, they're notable in other ways. I'd forgotten some of the visual extras - the War of the Worlds poster in INVADERS FROM MARS for instance, or the elusive short story about Charley Pollard at the back of the front cover of NEVERLAND. And then of course are the Writers' Notes. I would pour over those, imagining what I would say if I were given the chance to write a Big Finish.

(It's funny that I now avoid recording CD extras for my stories whenever I can - it's just not the same listening to me mumble on, I want to sit and hone what I want to say. With Words. I managed to have one shot at this, in the Special Edition of my ONCE AND FUTURE episode. I wonder if I've nurtured this Substack to write something similar for my other stories too.)

I do appreciate physical media. I like a nice Blu-ray, I have the odd Vinyl. But weirdly I'd never put the Compact Disc in the same mental bracket. Now I'm sitting and sorting through them… they really are delightful artefacts. And I know so much of this enjoyment will be the fact they are riddled with nostalgia. Older fans had their Target books, younger fans had the likes of the 'Doctor Who DVD Files'. I had this lot. And these scuffs and scratches… some of that is storage, but some of that are grubby childish hands fumbling through CDs like they're all the keys to the TARDIS.

And I have no idea if any of the discs will still play. I'm scared to find out.

THE FUTURE (Big Will Finish?)

By this point, I expect I have fewer DOCTOR WHO stories left to write than I've already written. I judge this on the simple fact that I have done so many already - and trust me, you have no idea what that number is yet. I may be pleasantly surprised to look back and learn that this kind of thinking was absolute codswallop… but even if it

isn't - I've been given some amazing opportunities and written alongside some absolute legends. It's been a joy.

But it's as I sit with these CDs that I really think about the future. Not if I'm around and still writing stories or not. I'm wondering if the adventures I've written to date will continue to be heard; if they'll wriggle inside the ear of a listener and stick around for good. Because these ancient *BRAND NEW FULL-CAST AUDIO CD*s scattered across my kitchen table... that's what they did to me. They are the beginnings of a writing life. This is me discovering series arcs and character arcs. This is me learning DOCTOR WHO can be poetic as well as pulpy. I'm still amazed I write for Big Finish, since a lot of Big Finish is why I write. I find that frivolously cyclical. A shiny-yet-moldy CD.

So if any of my own tiny offerings on disc and download can one day offer a slither of similar inspiration... well, I think that'll make me very happy.

But that's too much to think about right now.

I dust off my CD Walkman and press Play.

*

Two bits of advice for budding audio writers, if I may.

One, listen to everything. Figure out how it works. Learn their rhythms until you can regurgitate them.

Two, don't store things in a damp barn.

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D. V. Bishop Mar 25, 2025

Liked by Tim Foley

Wonder which Sarah Jane Smith SPARE PARTS was lurking within? One of mine, or was it flirting with Terrance, Barry, Peter or Rupert? Crikey, just realised only Peter Anghelids and I are the only Big Finish SJS audio writers still alive! Gulp.

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